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GETTING THE BEST PERFORMANCE FROM YOUR EMPLOYEES

ABSTRACT

This paper provides insights, perspectives, and recommendations on what it takes to get the best performance from the people who work for you. This message is communicated with specific actions and activities to use to motivate employees to achieve and excel. This is not a “textbook” approach to people management but rather the focus of the paper is on what has worked for the author based on his own experiences and “lessons learned” during his over 28 years as a subordinate, manager, executive, and leader. The objective of the paper is to convince the reader that the author’s recommended **“Golden Rule”** approach to managing and leading employees will improve morale, enhance productivity, and positively impact the “bottom line.”

INTRODUCTION

One of the best teachers for becoming a better manager and leader is experience. This is probably most true for “people” management and leadership. Through trial and error and the “lessons learned” that result from making mistakes, you can become better at knowing what works with people and what doesn’t. You can develop an appreciation for what motivates them to excel and what turns them off. Knowing how to get the best performance from the people who work for you is critical to

achieving successful results. You may very well be able to get what you want in the short-term by a “kick in the pants,” but you will not create the type of environment conducive to the long-term organizational success that results from employee satisfaction with their work and retention of your best performers. To be the “best that you can be” in people management and motivation, you have got to be willing to try new things and create an environment where people want to excel. In my judgment, based on over 28 years of experience as a subordinate, supervisor, manager, executive, and leader, you can achieve this objective by application of the **“Golden Rule”** in the workplace—i.e., treat others the way you would like to be treated. Frankly, if you can “recall,” when you get into a position where you can do something about it, those workplace characteristics that would have made you a more satisfied and productive performer as a rank and file employee, then you are well on your way to becoming an effective supervisor and people motivator.

What follows are some simple but “proven” approaches for getting the best performance from the people who work for you. You may not want to use every single one of these approaches, and you may very well have to “tailor” some of them to fit your own personality and that of the organization you lead, but they can produce meaningful and measurable results. Further,

don't get discouraged if the approaches are not 100% effective with all of your employees because people are different in what they like and don't like, and they also have to be receptive to what you are trying to do to create a workplace environment that people like being in and which motivates them to want to be the "best that they can be."

COMMUNICATE TO YOUR PEOPLE

- Be clear.
- Be candid.
- Be thorough.
- Be frequent and timely.
- Use all/appropriate mediums.
- You need to give your employees the facts: "the good, the bad, and the ugly." Simply tell the truth because that is what people need and want to hear, and it's easier to remember than a lie.

EMPOWER YOUR PEOPLE

- Delegate responsibility and authority to your employees that is commensurate with their expertise and experience. I call it "enlightened" empowerment.
- Provide your employees the specifics of what is expected, the boundaries of their authority and accountability, and then "get out of their way!"
- Tolerate mistakes because people do learn from them. If you punish mis-

takes, then forget about empowerment. If the employee makes the same mistake repeatedly, then you have a different issue that requires a different course of action to address and resolve.

- Empowerment is not a cliché if you really believe in it and mean it. Empowerment does work, but if you really don't believe in it, then don't preach it because people aren't dumb—you'll soon find that although they may "play" along, they won't be "participating" in the charade.

DEVELOP YOUR PEOPLE

- Results in more knowledgeable, confident, effective, and productive employees.
- Makes sense anytime, but it's a must in a downsizing environment or where people resources must be kept to a minimum. What this means is that when you are facing staff reductions, you should invest more money and time, not less, on training your remaining employees, which is generally just the opposite of what actually happens.
- Use college courses, formal/informal training, cross training, mentoring, and don't overlook challenging assignments as an approach to developing your employees.
- If you ignore development or slash training funds during tight budget situations, you will impact productivity, the bottom line, and your organization's future.

RECOGNIZE AND REWARD YOUR PEOPLE

- Use cash and non-cash (including words).
- Simply saying “Thank you” or “Well done” has a great impact.
- Employees don’t want “hand outs.”
- Reward when merited. The paycheck is for doing the job in a fully satisfactory manner. The “extras” are for doing what is expected very well or for doing more than what is expected well.
- “Real time” recognition is the most effective.
- Celebrate/publicize the recognition rather than doing it behind “closed doors.” A public forum is the best way to recognize and reward unique or exceptional efforts by your employees.
- “Praise in public, criticize in private” is good advice.
- Get employees themselves involved in the recognition and rewards process in some way. You can do this by having an employee representative participate in reviewing award nominations and/or by having an employees’ committee be responsible for reviewing, approving, and presenting certain types of awards whether they be monetary or non-monetary in nature.

PREACH, PROMOTE, AND PRACTICE PROFESSIONALISM

- Support employee self-improvement activities.
- Results in better employees. Involvement in professional associations and activities helps both employees and the organization—this is a very effective developmental activity that should be encouraged and supported by the organization.
- It is time and money well spent; it is an “investment,” if you will, in an organization’s present and future.
- Lead by example!
- Does require some level of personal commitment and sacrifice from the employee.

DEMONSTRATE A SENSE OF HUMOR

- Smile and laugh often! It’s good for you, and it’s infectious.
- Maintain a positive/upbeat attitude. Count your “blessings,” rather than your trials and tribulations/failures. You will generally discover that you have more of the former than the latter and much to be thankful for and happy about.
- “It ain’t life or death!” You are not as indispensable as you might think, so don’t take yourself too seriously. If you haven’t noticed, when the President of the United States dies, as tragic as this

event is, the government and the Nation keep moving along.

- This is one of the key components for creating a workplace environment that employees like coming to, rather than dreading it. It helps retention and recruitment.
- The bottom line is to “enjoy yourself—don’t worry, be happy!”

RESPECT YOUR EMPLOYEES

- Respect your employees not just for what they do, but also for who they are. Yes, they are workers, but they are also people who want to be valued and appreciated.
- People don’t come to work with the idea in mind to goof off or fail. They want to contribute and succeed. Management has a responsibility to help them to do this.
- Let your employees know that you “value” them both for what they do and for what they have to say.
- Remember birthdays, do “walkabouts,” greet employees by their first name when you see them, and take them to lunch for one-on-one conversations.
- The “*Golden Rule*” says it all when it comes to showing respect for your employees.

DEMONSTRATE LEADERSHIP TO YOUR EMPLOYEES

- Have a vision and share it. Set high goals and expectations. Establish and maintain a “focus” on getting done what needs to get done to make your organization successful.
- Preach, practice, and promote integrity and ethical behavior, and support your employees in this regard.
- Be sincere, passionate, enthusiastic, and energetic about what you do. It shows, and it does make a difference.
- Motivate your employees, develop them, and recognize and reward them.
- Get them what they need to be successful.
- Practice fairness and impartiality.
- Admit when you’ve made a mistake—your employees will be as understanding and forgiving as you are. No one is infallible.
- Make decisions! Yes, solicit input, and yes, discuss and consider this feedback, but the “buck” stops with you. Your employees expect (and want) you to make decisions, and that’s what you get paid to do.
- Be a mentor/coach.
- Set the example for your employees to follow. Make yourself someone who they respect and want to emulate. If you want to know what kind of person you need to be whom others will respect and want to emulate, read the poem by the late Robert Frost titled

“The Road Not Taken”, and follow his advice. The following excerpt from this insightful poem succinctly describes what it takes if you want to “stand out” in a crowd:

“I shall be telling this with a sigh,
Somewhere ages and ages hence,
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
and I
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the
difference.”

CONCLUSION

To summarize, to be an effective people manager, you need to **Communicate; Empower; Develop; Recognize and Reward; Preach, Promote, and Practice Professionalism; Demonstrate a Sense of Humor; Respect Your Employees; and Lead**. As a leader, “traveling the road less traveled by” can be more difficult at times, but it does “make a difference.” The bottom line is that getting the best performance from the people who work for you is not rocket science. What it is, quite simply, is preaching and practicing the **“Golden Rule”** in the workplace. If you supervise, manage, and lead people based on treating them the way you would like to be treated, you will be pleasantly surprised at the results. You can expect better morale, more satisfied employees, fewer complaints and grievances, and improved productivity and performance, all of which contribute to successful results. The following quotes say it well:

“People don’t leave companies, they leave bad bosses.” (Beverly Kaye,

co-author of Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em: Getting Good People to Stay)

“Brains, like hearts, go where they are appreciated.” (Robert S. McNamara, Former U.S. Secretary of Defense)

Therefore, my advice to you, based on my over 20 years of “learning” experiences in people management and leadership positions, is to try this approach♦you’ll like it, your employees will too, and it works!

REFERENCE

The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged. Edited by Edward Connery Lathem, Henry Holt and Company, 1979.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Brent Armstrong is Technical Director of the Engineering and Technology Services Division of EG&G Technical Services, Inc. He retired from the Federal Government in 2001 as a member of the Senior Executive Service, its cadre of top managers. Prior to his retirement, he received the *Meritorious Executive Award* from President George W. Bush. He is a certified professional in four areas: property, contracting, environmental management, and quality improvement. Mr. Armstrong, who is a member of NPMA’s Three Rivers Chapter, has lectured extensively on human resources and property management, contracting, and the importance of professionalism. He preaches, practices, and promotes the application of total quality management principles and the “*Golden Rule*” as the optimal approach for getting the best performance from the people who work for him.